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## **BUDDHIST ECHOES IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINA AND CANADA<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Postmodern university education should provide students with, among other things, a third eye of wisdom to see the world and themselves. The enculturation of Buddhism in university education serves to realize this grand aim. This paper first examines the historical development and practical significance of the Buddhist components in both Chinese and Canadian contexts. Based on the cases of representative universities in the two countries, it then analyzes the permeation of Buddhism in the two countries' university education, comparing the implications of Buddhist education in their respective higher-learning contexts. The findings indicate how, in their own ways, Chinese and Canadian universities employ Buddhist concepts in shaping students' morality, enriching the humanistic and / or liberal education and assisting students in adapting to the changing world.

### **Buddhism and Society in Postmodern Contexts: The Case of China**

Buddhism in China is more than 2,000 years old. Its greatest popularity and climactic development was in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). As New China walked on the road of socialism, religion was undergoing a revival. As life gets more materialistically oriented, and urban pressures increase, spiritual needs are becoming more of a necessity than other modern conveniences. Buddhism is showing signs of vigorous life in the cities and countryside of China as a result of its vitality to adjust itself to modern conditions. This strong resurgence of Buddhism in contemporary China, such as the renovation of monasteries, the various Buddhist ceremonies and cultural festivals may be explained by the softening or flexibility of the Communist Party's policy towards religions after the Reform and Open policies in the early 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Buddhism helps the present-day Chinese to find meaning and value in a rapidly changing society.

The Chinese culture has always emphasized the importance of combining moral education and skills training. This point was stressed by the Confucian tradition that employees tools to help students to cultivate "the core of values fostering a spirit of self-discipline, family solidarity, public morality and social responsibility" (Yao, 2003, p. 283). Chinese philosophy and Buddhist wisdom have helped in the overall development of Chinese students and intelligentsia. Humanistic Buddhism advocated by Master Taixu and others focuses on personal development in the mundane world for the benefit of oneself and others dwelling in the secular society as well as the equality and love of all living creatures and the environment. Its goals of personal refinement, the improvement of individual and social life, success in this

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<sup>2</sup> For an insightful critique of Chinese religious policy, refer to Leung, B. (2005).

world and the hereafter, and elevating ethical development all contribute to all-round development of an individual in the postmodern society.

Generally speaking, Buddhist education aims at training humans to deliver themselves out of suffering. The greatest treasure or asset of Buddhist philosophy is education in wisdom and the resultant virtue from the product of Buddhist enlightenment. The Chinese government has realized that it is unwise to discard Chinese ancient civilization or wisdom; rather, it should be rekindled to compete with the prevalent westernization of the Chinese youth. The natural result of this orientation is the resurgence and the popularity of Chan Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism and other sects of Buddhism in China today.

The positive and soul-reaching influence of Buddhist education upon human society is evident during the course of its development in China. Since Confucianism, for all its systematic doctrines of an ideal social structure, emphasizes too much on people's abiding attachment to individual and social achievements, Buddhism offers the much needed morality based on altruism in order to achieve the healthy development of the nation. As I argue, the Buddhist enculturation in education is to infuse moral and spiritual values into the present materialistic and technical education practice, for the modern education cannot solve crises and conflicts incurred by current world developments. Buddhism can show or remind the modern people what they should do to preserve the world, nature and all sentient beings in it.

### **Buddhism and Society in Postmodern Contexts: The Case of Canada**

There are two major means by which Canadians have contacted and benefited from Buddhism, the transformative teaching from Asia: through immigrants from Asian countries and through universities and colleges that teach and research Buddhism. Chinese and Japanese workers who came to Canada to work on the railroads first brought Buddhism to Canada. In 1905, the first Buddhist temple was set up in British Columbia, and was moved to Vancouver the next year. The largest Buddhist organization in Canada was created by the Japanese Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism, with temples set up in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. A substantial expansion of Buddhism in Canada began in the last half of the 20th century. During and after World War II, with a large number of Japanese-Canadians moving to Alberta, this province became the most important place for Buddhism in Canada. As Terry Watada comments, "The revival of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism from near eradication is attributable to the exile of Japanese Canadians from the West Coast to Southern Alberta" (Watada, 1996). Alberta thus became the cradle of the academic study of Buddhism in North America.

This monastic orientation in the spread of Buddhism in Canada was later replaced by Zen Buddhism, which believed in the potential Buddha-hood for all. The monumental event for this epoch-making transition was marked by the establishment of The Zen Lotus Society in 1967 by Venerable Samu Sunim. The name of the Society was changed to Buddhist Society for Compassionate Wisdom, a North American Buddhist Order with five mission operations: in Ann Arbor, Chicago, New York City, Toronto, and Mexico City. The significance of this change is that Buddhism in Canada, after more than two decades of Asian styles of monasticism, is now open to all people who wish to seek enlightenment and

liberation from the anxieties and sufferings in the postmodern complexities of the world.

Zen emphasizes the attainment of enlightenment and the personal direct insight in the Buddhist teachings, playing down on the importance of sutras and doctrines and favoring direct understanding through zazen and interaction with a master. The Zen Buddhist mission centers in Canada aim to propagate the meditation movement to initiate a culture of enlightenment and green spirituality. The Universal Buddhist Temple, as a traditional Chinese Buddhist temple in Vancouver, practices Pure Land and Chan (Zen) Buddhism with Confucian and Taoist spirituality tendencies. The temple focuses on meditation and parapsychology to help maintain the psychological and spiritual well-being of the Canadians. Moreover, the international Buddhist movements from Taiwan—the Amitabha Buddhist Societies, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association, Dharma Drum Mountain, Foguangshan, True Buddha school—all have multiples centers in various parts of Canada (Irons, 2008).

In sum, a variety of factors have combined to greatly increase the Buddhist presence in Canada. As Kenneth Tanaka (Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 294) has pointed out,

The plurality of religions also characterizes the Buddhist groups as well, for virtually every school of Buddhism has now found a foothold on American soil. These schools now exist side by side, often in the same community – a situation unthinkable in Asia, where they often had no knowledge of each other.

With Buddhism becoming a major religion in Canada over the last half-century, it is no longer ‘ethnic’ associated only with immigrant Asian people; there is also a growing constituency of Euro-Canadian Buddhists conscientiously dedicated to the faith. At present, close to 500 Buddhist organizations (including temples, centers, associations, retreats, charities, businesses, etc.) are prospering in Canada, manifesting the doctrines and practices of the entire spectrum of Buddhist schools in Asia and guiding an estimated number of 250,000 adherents.<sup>3</sup> According to the 2001 census, the number of Buddhists increased 84% to about 300,300, or about 1% of the Canadian population.<sup>4</sup> For all these factors and others, it could be said that Buddhism has had a fascinating history in Canada.

### **Buddhism in Chinese Universities**

Throughout the history of China, Buddhism and the traditional Chinese education had always been hand in hand in their common pursuit of wisdom. Chinese universities often undertake the responsibility of providing Buddhist courses, since Buddhist education is proved constructive in cultivating eligible citizens with healthy personalities during the higher-learning phase. After the serious disruption of all religions in China during the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), both Buddhism and higher education have experienced a revival and resurgence. For the students in the socialist China, the nature of education should

<sup>3</sup> For a listing of Canadian Buddhist centers, please access <http://buddhismcanada.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to “2001 Census: analysis series Religions in Canada”, at Statistics Canada’s website ([www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)).

always be altruistic and for the well-being of the country. Buddhism is thus naturally noticed by the government to be a kindred spirit with the socialist ideals of education.

The significance and implications of incorporating Buddhism courses into Chinese university curriculum can be multifaceted, for Buddhism plays so indispensable a part in the cultural identity of the nation. To be specific, popularizing Buddhism within the context of university education can serve the purposes of both modernizing this time-honored religion in current society, cultivating students' healthy personality and cultural awareness, and promoting both religious and secular education. Nowadays, Buddhism is undergoing a modernizing process to better adapt to the technologically and scientifically developing society. Buddhism needs to cope with the drastic changes on both ideological and practical levels, and to be able to explain the changing realities of a more pluralistic world and reconcile with the mainstream world outlook. Besides, Buddhist concepts should find its way into the major educational institutes so as to be promoted effectively and developed academically. The integration of Buddhism courses into university curriculum not only expands the scope of target audiences who are most often highly educated and civilized, it also enriches the field of Buddhist researches as an academic subject. For instance, to cope with a more pluralistic world, Buddhist research themes are more globalized, and research methods are more interdisciplinary and comprehensive (Yao, 2009, pp. 347-351). Therefore, to revive this time-honored religion socially and academically in an age when knowledge, science and information are highly valued, fully utilizing the educational resources of Chinese universities should be considered a top priority.

Classes on the history of Buddhism, Buddhist culture of China, Buddhist classics as literature, Buddhist art and Buddhist philosophy are offered in most of the key universities in China. Most of such classes are run under the department of philosophy, Chinese language, literature, history, foreign languages, and archaeology. Some of these classes take the form of selective courses open to all students in the university. At Beijing Foreign Studies University, the general course "Buddhism in Chinese Culture"<sup>5</sup> run by the School of English and International Studies is among one of the most popular general classes in the university, with enrollment often over 100 students. In addition, public lectures by eminent Buddhist masters are organized by the universities, such as Taiwanese Buddhist master Venerable Sheng-yen's lecture at Peking University and Tsinghua University in 2005, Master Hsing Yun's lecture at Zhongshan university in 2006 and Master Yancan's lecture on happy living at Beijing Foreign Studies University in 2012.

Besides on-campus courses on Buddhism, various off-campus activities also sprout in China, such as Chan summer camps, Chan Study Societies, etc. Ven Ming Hai (Ming, 1993), a graduate from the philosophy department of Peking University and now abbot of Bo Lin Chan Monastery in Hebei Province, has been organizing annual summer camps for university students and others since the 1990s. Such activities have contributed to the comprehensive development of Chinese college students with admirable and wholesome personalities. As for the cultivation of

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<sup>5</sup> I have been teaching this course since 2010, with students' rating score ranging between 97-99.

healthy personalities, Buddhist teachings have long been proven constructive in this respect. For example, the concept of “Nirvana” teaches human beings to form a peaceful and detached mind and to accept the transformation between life and death as a natural process. The law of “Five Percepts” establishes the baseline of Buddhist morality, imposing its regulating power via individual’s self-discipline. The wisdom of “Emptiness” or “Non-volition” inspires the earthlings to get rid of their worldly desires to end the sufferings. All the teachings above will exert positive influences on students’ self-improvement during the most crucial period of their character formation and ultimately contribute to their future development as social beings.

With regard to the cultivation of “cultural awareness”, Buddhist education is even deemed indispensable in the Chinese cultural context. More than 3000 year’s Buddhist influence fundamentally changes the developmental path of Chinese society and reshapes the Chinese cultural identity. To be specific, the permeation of Buddhism can be identified in Chinese literature, visual arts, prevalent cultural practices and even people’s way of thinking. In the case of Chinese literature, Buddhism exerts its influence on almost all aspects of literary creation, including themes, forms, the use of symbols and metaphors, etc. Hence, without adequate Buddhist knowledge, a university student cannot fully understand his own cultural background and identity. Moreover, learning Buddhism in college is also conducive to the cultivation of an all-embracing mindset. In the increasingly globalized and culturally-diversified world, students should develop be flexible with different perspectives from specific historical and cultural backgrounds. By learning to interpret the Buddhist canons and practices in its cultural context, students’ ethnocentric mentality will be deconstructed, being replaced by an open and tolerant mindset which could benefit their future development as world citizens.

Beijing University has a program especially designed to train Chinese students in Sanskrit, aiming to set up a team of specialists to help translate the large number of manuscripts discovered in traditional Chinese Buddhist centers like Tibet. The history of the Sanskrit program at Beijing University can trace its origin to 1960s. It was later on expanded and strengthened by the nationally renowned scholar Ji Xianlin, who translated many Sanskrit works into Chinese and is deemed by many Chinese as the greatest Chinese scholar of Sanskrit, who introduced classical Indian culture to the Chinese people. This program was established to resume and carry on the legacy of Ji, who passed away in 2009. The Research Institute of Sanskrit Manuscripts and Buddhist Literature at Peking University is working with regional governments and hoping to create an archive for lost manuscripts and palm-leaves.

Renmin University of China, second in importance and fame only to Beijing University and Qinghua University in China, founded the program of Buddhism and the Religious Studies in the 1950s, and in the 1960s when professor Fang Litian joined in this program, the teaching and research activities have been greatly consolidated. In 2000, this center became the primary research base granted by China’s Ministry of Education, and from then on it has become the only state research center in the field of Buddhism and Religious Studies in colleges and universities in China. The Institute for Studies of Buddhism and religious theory (ISBRT) in RUC has undergraduate courses, master degree teaching courses in Religion, doctor degree teaching courses in Religion, and related postdoctoral

research programs, thus formulating a complete course system from masters and doctors to post-doctors.

### **Buddhism in Canadian Universities**

The late 19 and early 20 century witnessed the expansion of Buddhist influence in North America. Major universities started to deem Buddhism courses as an integral part of “liberal art education” and incorporated them into the regular curriculum (Reynolds, 2001, p. 12). Since Buddhism does not enjoy dominant status among mainstream populations in the western world, scholars and educators are inclined to perceive Buddhist education as the cultivation of students’ “critical and evaluating ability” (Reynolds, 2001, p. 9) or the accumulation of “cross-cultural experiences” (Tsai, 2008, p. 161) rather than the teaching of spiritual ideals to enhance students’ mental and cultural wellbeing, as the Chinese universities have done. To them, courses on Buddhism provide undergraduate students with a new perspective and various critical skills to “meaningfully navigate a pluralistic world” (Tsai, 2008, p. 161). Hence, most of their researches provide insights on the pedagogical rather than religious level, serving more as the exploration of the means than the ends.

Education of Buddhism in Canada adopts the pedagogical approach, which focuses on effective teaching objectives and curriculum design; unlike its Chinese counterpart, it attaches great importance to the cultivation of critical and analytical abilities, aiming to prepare students for the possible cross-cultural encounters in the culturally-diversified modern world. In other words, they define the Buddhist curriculum as a critical way of seeing the world rather than a content-based interpretive course. The cultivation of critical and evaluative abilities is one of the core objectives of Buddhist education in Canada and more or less the western world. Since Buddhism is a highly mind-probing religion with a very special outlook on the world, learning to interpret Buddhist canons and practices from different even contrasting perspectives can help western learners develop analytical and evaluative ability, the very quality that defines individualism, instead of the Chinese concepts of collectivism and harmony, and empowers them to make critical judgments while exploring the pluralistic world.

Though the two countries share the basic understanding of the core concepts of Buddhism, they differ in the actual focuses and specific approaches. Reynolds examines the role of the North American undergraduate Buddhist courses as “liberal art education” from a postmodern point of view. That is, he addresses the “postmodern interests and concerns” in his definition of the course, identifying the cultivation of “critical analysis” as one of the major objectives of Buddhism courses (Reynolds, 2001, p. 13). Moreover, he believes that by discussing “how canons and practices are received in Buddhist traditions” in college classrooms, students are equipped with “well-disciplined interpretive skills” which are highly applicable to other religious contexts or different “humanly articulated worlds” (Reynolds, 2001, p. 12).

Julius Tsai, more concerned about how Buddhist education balances between the cultivation of students’ “self-awakening” and their “intellectual abilities”, discusses the pedagogical implications of the “three aspects of Buddhist thought and practice” in Buddhist education, namely how the Buddhist notions of “No-self”,

“Skillful means” and “Awakening” (Tsai, 2008) contribute to the cultivation of “intellectual awareness” which “sustains them through life”. Through Buddhist education in the Canadian way, two kinds of intellectual sensibility are aimed at: 1) the rudimentary historical consciousness, meaning to perceive Buddhism and all other religions as “dynamic historically conditioned” existences; 2) the persistence of cross-cultural encounters, suggesting that one should learn to “reconcile one’s own cultural background and inherited world views with the relative strangeness of other cultures” (Tsai, 2008, p. 159).

Canadian universities have granted professorships to several international scholars including Leon Hurvitz at the University of British Columbia, Herbert V. Guenther and Julian Pas at the University of Saskatchewan, A. K. Warder at the University of Toronto and Jan Yün-Hua at McMaster among others in the latter half of the 20th century. Because most universities and colleges, large or small, offer courses in Buddhism, education has become the most important means by which Canadians come into contact with this Asian religious tradition. Each year thousands of students are introduced to the basic doctrines and history of Buddhism. Presently, every major university in Canada offers courses on Buddhism with several offering advanced degrees in Buddhist Studies or Religious Studies with Buddhism as an emphasis.

With the University of British Columbia (UBC) as a case in point, Buddhism is studied with a variety of disciplinary approaches and in historical periods spanning the ancient to the contemporary. The Department of Asian Studies constitutes the center of this teaching and research on Buddhism. The Buddhism and Contemporary Society Program sponsors undergraduate and graduate teaching about Buddhism at UBC, brings in a variety of visiting speakers as part of the TLKY lecture series, holds workshops and conferences on issues of contemporary relevance, and supports student research on the contemporary state of Buddhism in Asia and abroad. Many undergraduate courses that focus on Buddhism may be taken as part of an undergraduate major or minor in Asian Studies, including Introduction to Buddhism; Buddhism in China; and Special Topics in Buddhist Studies. The Department plans to increase the number of Buddhism-related courses and courses on Asian Religions in coming years. Other courses cover Theravāda Buddhist narratives, Mahāyana Buddhist philosophy, etc. Undergraduate courses that include Buddhism are Religions of the World, Cultural Foundations of East Asia, Cultural Foundations of South Asia, Cultural Foundations of Southeast Asia and many others.

UBC’s Asian Studies offers Master of Arts and Ph.D. degrees in Korean, East Asian Buddhism, South East Asian and South Asian culture, including literature, linguistics, pre-modern history, religion and philosophy. Advanced language training in Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Indonesian, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese is available, as well as courses on source materials and research methods in Classical Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies, and Korean Studies. It is also possible to take a one-year Master’s degree (Master’s of Asia Pacific Policy Studies) in Asia and policy studies for students who prefer the contemporary aspects of Buddhism.

To recapitulate, Buddhism in Chinese universities tend to let students cultivate the heart, making them more humane, more harmonious and more contributive to the peace and stability of the society. On the part of Buddhism in Canadian universities, though the Chinese concerns are also taken into consideration, yet the

focus is on the use of Buddhist concepts and practices to enhance students' analytical and critical abilities to better understand the world so as to make it serve the human race better, as the deep-rooted Western idea of dualism would show.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Since the core tenet of Buddhism is education, Buddhists are articulating their spirituality in terms of education, in locales like temples, centers, institutes, pagodas, gompas, wats and viharas designed purely for teaching and learning. Some scholars, whom I totally agree with, even argue that Buddhism is not a religion, but a kind of teaching or education and the Buddha a teacher. In this vein, university students have had much significant contribution to make to the development of Buddhism. With the central place of Buddhism in the cultural context of China, the students, scholars and monastics often hold the common aspirations of getting spiritual enlightenment and enhancement for the purpose of a truly harmonious society. With the Buddhist concepts of Non-duality and others, people can expect to be world citizens, without discriminations against the "other" or the different; the ideal world would be like that of Amitahba's pure land where only happiness and absolute equality abound. On the part of the Canadian side of the Buddhist education in universities, the common aim of achieving wisdom has another dimension, which is the cultivation of critical judgments, evaluations and the analytical skills. The essential concern is to help students to develop the skills of critical analysis, the rhetorical skills of argumentation that contribute to an independent and individualistic entity. All textbooks, courses, and classroom teaching methods are oriented toward this goal.

From the different cultural contexts of the academic analyses of Buddhism in China and Canada, we are faced with both common and differing perspectives of evaluating the Buddhist education in different cultural contexts, with Asian / Chinese educators focusing more on its historical development and cultural significance while the North American / Canadian counterpart stressing the its pedagogical function as a liberal art curriculum. Such differences might to some extent be explained by the fact that in Buddhism (as the pillar of the oriental culture) is not to be found many beliefs and principles that belong to the Western mainstream religions like Christianity. Buddhism in Asian countries, however, enjoys greater popularity and its permeation in mainstream cultures is more salient. Therefore, Buddhist teaching in universities not only aims to cultivate eligible individuals, but also shoulders the responsibility of promoting the development of Buddhism academically and socially. In this sense, China, given its rich Buddhist culture legacies, should consider Buddhism both as a means of education and as a way of achieving the ultimate goal of world unity.

Finally, if we adopt a global view of Buddhism and its benefits to all sentient beings under the sun, promoting Buddhism as a religion and an academic subject should be attached equal importance as the cultivation of learners' personality, critical thinking ability and global harmony in university education. To achieve this goal, course objectives, curriculum design and research methods of Buddhism education should all be modernized to keep up with the development of the world which is already on its way of becoming a global village. That should be the greatest significance of Buddhism for the post-modern human race.



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